

UKIP PARLIAMENTARY RESOURCE UNIT

Reforming Postal Voting



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A history of absent voting in the UK

In 1872, a parliamentary by-election took place in Pontefract. On his appointment as Paymaster General, Liberal MP Hugh Childers had to resign his seat and fight a by-election, as was then required for any backbench MP accepting ministerial office. The reason that the by-election was historic, is that it was the first parliamentary election to be held by secret ballot. That had been made possible by the passing earlier that year of the Ballot Act 1872.

Prior to 1872, elections were much more open to abuse as voting was often a very public display with eligible voters showing raised hands to signify their chosen candidate. The franchise was limited at the time, although it was expanded to include certain skilled working class men. But bribes and intimidation were commonplace, especially amongst financially vulnerable voters. Employers and landlords would often attend the vote, or send a representative on their behalf to ensure that their workers or tenants voted for their approved candidate. Voters refusing to be coerced could face unemployment or eviction.

From 1872, until the passing of the Representation of the People Act 1918, voting was only in person and in secret; however, following the First World War, it was decided that those serving in the armed forces were prevented 'by reason of the nature of their occupation...from voting at a poll' and allowed to cast an absent ballot. Entitlement to an absent ballot for those not serving with the armed forces was not granted until the Representation of the People Act 1948. The new Act expanded the right to an absent vote for those who genuinely could not attend their polling station, either through physical incapacity, or from those who would need to travel by air or sea, due to the nature of their occupation. Further extensions were made for voters who were otherwise genuinely absent under the Representation of the People Act 1985, but it was not until 2000, under Prime Minister Tony Blair, that application for postal voting was made available 'on demand'.

Addressing voter participation?

In 1974, the year of two General Elections, both of which were in colder, darker months – February and October - turnout was at a respectable 72.8% and 78.8%. Turnout at subsequent elections would remain above 70% for next 27 years.

The 1997 General Election delivered an historic Labour landslide on the back of a turnout of 71.3% and the newly-elected government sought to make changes to ease the accessibility to absent voting. However, the 1999 European Parliament elections garnered the interest of only 24% of voters.

In addition, at the time, Labour MP for Knowsley George Howarth was tasked with chairing the Working Party on Electoral Procedures.

In light of the poor turnout in European Elections of 1999, the committee called for the following to be implemented as soon as possible:

- 1) Absent voting should be allowed on demand;
- 2) The application and voting procedures for absent voting should be simplified.

The Representation of the People Act 2000 allowed for certain local authorities to participate in pilot schemes to trial the extension and entitlement of postal voting, and in some cases, even allow for an all-postal ballot election. Other pilot schemes available included extending polling station opening hours/days, and the trialling of electronic voting and counting. It was concluded that the extension of postal voting was conducive to increasing voter participation in selected authorities, leading to a full roll-out for the General Election the following year. These changes were implemented in time for the 2001 General Election.

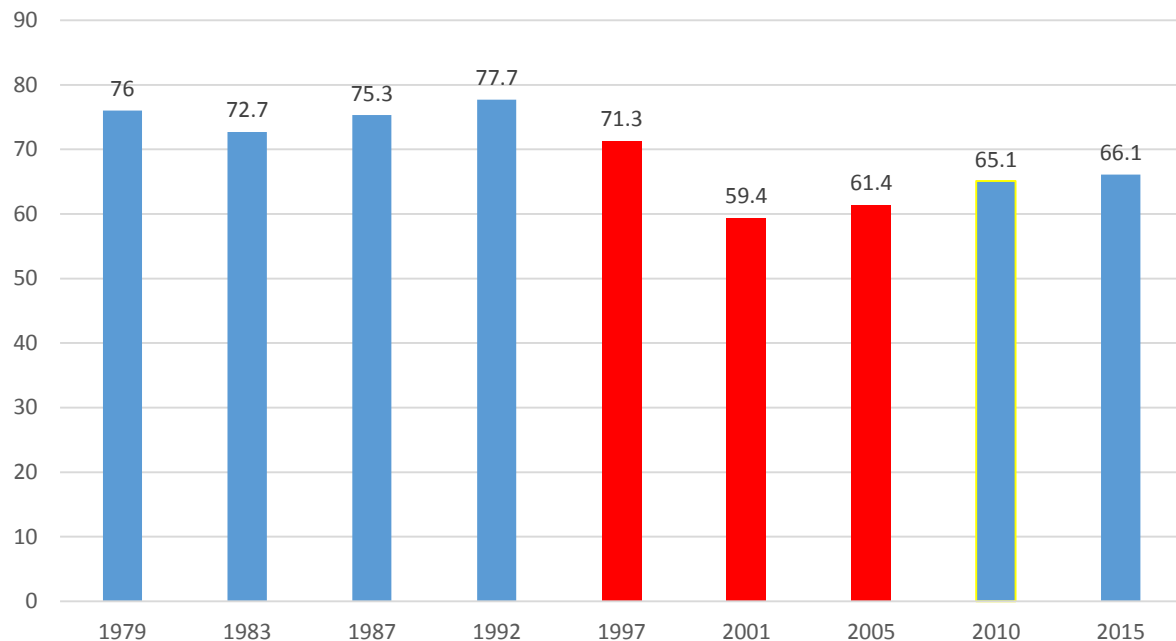
That General Election however was noted for its low voter turnout – 59.4%. That is, despite restrictions on postal voting being relaxed, as roughly 4% of voters opted for postal ballots. Following this poor voter turnout, further pilot schemes were announced, in order to kick-start voter participation. Perhaps the most significant pilot scheme was in 2004, when four English regions (North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber and East Midlands) trialled a postal-only ballot for the European Elections. Voter turnout in those regions did indeed increase significantly on the 1999 election, but turnout also increased in regions without a postal-only ballot. In fact, as The European Parliamentary and Local Elections (Pilots) Act 2004 only achieved Royal Assent just ten weeks before the Local and European elections, some local authorities were left unprepared, meaning that some voters were unable to return their ballot in time.

In the years that followed, the number and proportion of postal voters at each General Election has risen significantly. In 2005, 5,334,821 (12.4% of all electors) successfully applied for a postal vote. That increased to 6,980,005 (15.7% of all electors) in 2010 and to 7,575,632 (16.8% of all electors) in 2015.¹

¹ Postal voting, BRIEFING PAPER Number 7419, 4 December 2015, Elise Uberoi, House of Commons Library

Turnout has only marginally improved during this period before 66.1% of voters participated in 2015.

Figure 1: Voter turnout since 1979 (%)



Other causes of increased voter turnout since the introduction of postal votes on demand

One of the most commonly stated reasons for the introduction of postal votes on demand is that it makes voter participation easier, resulting in higher voter turnouts and it is true, since 2001, voter turnout has been on an upward trend. Evidence suggests that postal voters are far more likely to cast their ballots than regular voters. For example, at the 2015 General Election, 85.8% of postal voters cast their ballots, whilst only 63.2% of in-person voters made their mark at the ballot box. However, the major flaw in this approach is that many postal voters may be politically engaged enough to vote in person anyway, if a postal ballot was not available.

Early postal voting fraud case studies

With postal voting, voters are able to cast their ballot weeks away from polling day and from a remote location. In many cases, voters will cast their vote in private when their ballot paper arrives. Sadly, there have been a number of examples where postal voting has opened up issues of electoral fraud.

Blackburn

Blackburn councillor Muhammed Hussain was prosecuted and jailed for three and a half

years, after being found guilty of conspiring to defraud local elections in 2002. Investigators had found that 233 votes were fraudulent after it was discovered he had a campaign team dedicated to collecting blank postal ballots from voters. The police revealed that Hussain's home became a 'conveyer belt' for blank ballots to be fraudulently filled in. Judge Peter Openshaw called Hussain's actions to be of a scale unknown in Britain for a hundred years before brandishing the postal vote system as "wide open to fraud" ²

In the run up to the General Election, independent candidate in Blackburn and former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray, in an interview with the Sunday Times, highlighted the many issues faced with postal voting. In his interview he said: "I've been approached by several people in the Asian community who are under huge pressure from Labour activists to apply for a postal vote rather than a ballot vote and then hand their postal vote over to the Labour Party." ³

Birmingham

During the 2004 European and Local Elections, Birmingham became the focal point of postal voting fraud, when allegations were made against six Labour councillors. Of these, councillors Mohammed Islam, Muhammed Afzal and Mohammed Kazi, all of the Aston Ward, were described by the police as handling unsealed ballot papers in a deserted warehouse in the city in a so-called 'vote-rigging factory'. On one occasion, police discovered the three men working in the warehouse in the middle of the night with 'hundreds of postal votes spread out on a table'.

Election Commissioner Richard Mawrey QC upheld the convictions in 2005, saying "the system is wide open to fraud and any would-be political fraudster knows that," and adding that "massive, systematic and organised fraud" was the result of at least 1,500 postal votes being cast fraudulently across Birmingham. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the number of postal ballots issued in Birmingham jumped from 28,000 in 2003, to 70,000 in 2004.

The issue was compounded in April 2005 by the discovery of 1,000 uncounted postal ballots from the previous year's local elections, resulting in the suspension of John Owen, the head of Electoral Services in Birmingham. ⁴

Burnley

In 2006, Mozaquir Ali and Manzoor Hussain were accused and subsequently jailed for conspiracy to defraud postal-only elections in Burnley in 2004 by dishonestly applying for proxy votes. Returning Officer Gillian Taylor noted that 195 proxy applications were made in the Daneshouse with Stoneyholme Ward, whereas only 15 applications were made in

² Vote-rigging ex-councillor jailed, BBC News, Friday, 8 April, 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/lancashire/4425519.stm#> (accessed 15.03/2016)

³ Focus: Could the election be won by fraud, The Sunday Times, 10 April 2005 http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/article86542.ece# (accessed 15.03/2016)

⁴ Postal voting and electoral fraud 2001-09, House of Commons Library, Isobel White, page 16

the rest of the borough. Shamefully, Councillor Hussain retained his seat on the local authority for a number of months, whilst he was serving his 18-month prison sentence.⁵

Peterborough

In 2008, former Labour Mayor of Peterborough Mohammed Choudhary was jailed for nine months following the uncovering of a postal vote rigging scam where applications were made for ballot papers to be sent to different addresses. Postal vote applications were deliberately forged in such a way, that ballot papers were posted to addresses connected to Choudhary. Those voters would never receive their ballot papers, whilst other charges included the illegal handling of postal ballots, with voters being told to forfeit their votes as they arrived. Cultural reasons such as the notion that the head male of the family should handle votes and a lack of English skills were identified as enabling factors.⁶

Tower Hamlets

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets has been plagued by continuous problems associated with postal voting since as early as 2005. Respect, the party formerly headed by George Galloway, along with other local parties, made complaints to the police after the number of postal vote applications had nearly doubled. The then Labour-led council had issued 18,700 postal ballot papers with claims that on the April 18th deadline for returns, 6,000 applications were received. In one ten-storey tower block of flats in the borough, 90 out of 93 registered voters had applied for a postal ballot, many without their knowledge. Those voters subsequently failed to receive their ballot paper, with even the Electoral Commission highlighting the risk of ballot papers being intercepted on the ground floor lobby of apartment buildings.⁷

Postal vote issues continued into the Council elections in 2006, where many voters arrived at polling stations only to be turned away after finding that their vote had already been cast.⁸

During the London Mayoral and Assembly election in 2012, six Labour councillors were reported to the Metropolitan Police for “gross voting malpractices” after allegations of voting irregularities became rife in the borough. Allegations of voting irregularities include examples of postal votes being sent to voters no longer living in the borough and postal ballots being collected from voters.⁹

⁵ Anger over jailed councillor who still holds seat, Lancashire Telegraph, 15 December 2006

http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/1076928.anger_over_jailed_councillor_who_still_holds_seat/ (accessed 15.03/2016)

⁶ Former Mayor found guilty of vote rigging, Peterborough Today, 15 February 2008 <http://www.peterboroughtoday.co.uk/news/latest-news/former-mayor-found-guilty-of-vote-rigging-1-94392> (accessed 15.03/2016)

⁷ Police investigate ‘postal vote theft on massive scale’, The Times, 28 April 2006

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article2031128.ece> (accessed 15.03/2016)

⁸ Bitter war of words over Galloway’s wins, The Times, 6 May 2006 <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article2031203.ece> (accessed 15.03/2016)

⁹ Tower Hamlets postal vote fraud claims referred to police, BBC News, 26 April 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-17857850> (accessed 15.03/2016)

In 2014, Lutfur Rahman of Tower Hamlets First was elected to the position of Mayor, amid rampant speculation of voter fraud. He was subsequently removed from the post on corruption charges in April 2015. It was found that Rahman's supporters "cast hundreds of fake postal votes" and "a handwriting expert gave evidence to the court that hundreds of ballot papers may have been completed by the same person." At the trial, Richard Mawrey QC warned of "postal voting factories" and thousands of ballots being sold across Britain.¹⁰

Wythenshawe and Sale East

In some instances, for example, at Parliamentary by-elections, postal voters can receive their ballot just a few short days after the closing date of nominations. This was the case at the 2014 Wythenshawe and Sale East by-election, where postal ballots were posted just three days after the close of nominations. UKIP Leader Nigel Farage MEP commented: "I have been on benders for longer than the opening of the nominations and the start of the postal ballots. This has been a farce." With postal ballots typically completed within a few days of being received, it is now not uncommon for the bulk of these votes to be returned over a week, maybe even two weeks before polling day. During short campaigns, such as Parliamentary by-elections, this short lead time between the close of nominations and the issuing of postal votes invariably benefits parties such as Labour or the Conservatives, at the expense of challenger parties.

The North East Region leading the way?

In the North East region, postal voting plays a greater part in elections than in other parts of the country. South Tyneside Council, the local authority for South Shields, agreed to be a pilot scheme for a postal-only vote election in 2002. To an extent, this has normalised the idea of absent voting in these areas, but it has not been without its risks and downfalls. When discussing the extension of postal voting in the North East, Dr Alistair Clark, a senior politics lecturer at Newcastle University specialising in electoral integrity, highlighted that: "The main difficulty relates to the security of the ballot – we have no idea who is actually completing the ballot papers – anyone could be filling them out."¹¹

These local authority pilot schemes were swiftly followed by region-wide trials for the European and Local Elections in June 2004 and the failed referendum of an elected Regional Assembly later that year to be by postal vote only. The number of postal voters has steadily risen in the region, to the point where they constitute an overwhelmingly significant voting bloc. The influence of these postal voters becomes particularly more acute when coupled with either a short campaign, or a low turnout election.

It is during Parliamentary by-elections especially, when turnout is typically much lower and the campaign much shorter than usual. This was certainly the case at the South Shields By-Election in 2013 following the resignation of former Foreign Secretary David

¹⁰ Tower Hamlets mayor Lutfur Rahman is sacked for 'corrupt practices', The Telegraph 23 April 2015

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/11559926/Muslim-mayor-is-sacked-for-corrupt-practices.html> (accessed 15.03/2016)

¹¹ North East could be 'at greater risk of postal vote fraud' Chronicle Live, 5 March 2015 <http://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/north-east-could-at-greater-6865843> (accessed 15.03/2016)

Miliband. Turnout at this election was only 39.3%, down from 57.7% at the 2010 General Election, yet 58.2% of all votes cast were by postal ballot. With a campaign of only a few weeks, this makes it impossible for any insurgent party to challenge the incumbent party. Voter participation recovered to 57.8% at the 2015 General Election; however it is worth noting that turnout was significantly lower in 2010 and 2015 compared to the national average at those elections. This is despite, as we have already mentioned, the much higher than average number of postal voters in this seat, compared to the national average.¹²

At the 2015 General Election, 26% of voters in the region as a whole were issued with a postal ballot compared to 16.4% of all UK voters. Of the ten constituencies with the highest proportion of postal voters nationwide, eight are in the North East. Four Constituencies in the North East had over 40% of voters registered for a postal vote. These included Houghton and Sunderland South (43.3%), Sunderland Central (41.1%) and Washington and Sunderland West (40.4%). The overall turnouts for these constituencies were 56.3%, 57% and 54.6% respectively. One would think that with so many voters signed up to vote by post, that these constituencies would have a higher than average turnout, especially considering that 85.8% of postal ballot papers across the UK were returned. In the region, 34.9% of all votes cast during the General Election were postal ballots and in the four highlighted constituencies the majority of votes cast were postal ballots. Yet those same constituencies (in a different form prior to boundary changes) had suffered from low voter turnout long before 2015. Even in 1997, an election year with high turnout, the former Sunderland North seat (51.5%) and Sunderland South seat (58.8%), turnout was much lower than average and declined even further in 2001 and 2005. In the North East, postal voting on a large scale has had little if any long term effect on voter turnout, which suggests that other factors must be at play.

International Concerns

Cases of electoral fraud in 2004 were so severe, that the Council of Europe began investigating and alleged that the UK was in breach of European Convention on Human Rights for failure to ensure free and fair elections citing ‘the growing body of evidence that widespread absent vote fraud is taking place’. Former Home Office Ministerial aide David Wilshire expressed concern that “if the UK found itself in the company of places like Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Ukraine, which have been severely criticised” for failing to ensure elections were free and fair, it would not be a good place to be. The seriousness of postal vote fraud even led to authoritarian Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko raising his concerns of highlighting “a potential risk of violations of the principle of equal elections and of extensive abuses”¹³.

¹² The 2015 General Election: Aspects of participation and administration, Electoral Commission, Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, August 2015 http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/191861/Plymouth-UKPGE-electoral-data-report-final-WEB.pdf (accessed 15.03/2016)

¹³ Votes scandal puts Britain in the dock over human rights, The Times, 18 October 2006 http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/law/article2213596.ece?acs_cjd=true (accessed 15.03/2016)

Voters let down by postal votes

Besides the already well-publicised cases of electoral fraud related to postal voting, many voters are being disenfranchised, as their postal ballot has been rejected. At the 2015 General Election, 214,155 postal ballots were rejected across the UK. This equates to 3.3% of all postal ballots returned. Whilst this is a decline on 2010 figures, it is surely worrying that so many votes could be rejected. A quarter of these rejections were due to mismatched signatures with another 20% rejected for a mismatched date of birth.

Addressing the real causes of low turnout

The main argument used for the introduction and the subsequent retention of the postal vote on demand system is that it boosts voter turnout, mainly because it makes voting easier, particularly for those with busy lifestyles. However, as we have already seen, voter turnout bears very little correlation to the increasing use of postal voting.

The 1999 European Election, when turnout was just 24%, is often cited as the wake-up call for politicians to introduce alternative forms of voting. However, the lack of postal voting is hardly an excuse for such a low turnout. Reasons for voters staying at home include the use of a new voting system, which replaced 87 individual constituencies elected by first past the post, with nine newly created EU regions within England, plus Wales and Scotland. It was the first significant use of proportional representation, so many voters may have been confused by the change. Moreover, voters' attitudes towards Europe, beside opposition to joining the Single Currency, had stabilised. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats were enthusiastic about EU membership, whilst the Conservatives had not quite finished tearing themselves apart over the issue. The sudden decline in voter turnout was most likely a result of apathy mostly amongst Labour voters who didn't see Europe as an issue worthy of debate.

Voters decide whether to cast their ballot or not for a variety of reasons. The 2001 General Election is noted for its exceptionally low turnout, yet postal voting on demand was already in place. That general election had a low turnout for a number of reasons: Firstly, Labour had governed without incident for four years. With a stable economy and a relatively calm political and social environment, voters were content with business as usual. Besides the Foot and Mouth epidemic that delayed the poll to June, the election was best-remembered for the punch up between Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, after an egg was thrown at him by countryside protester Craig Evans. In the end, only 29 Parliamentary seats out of 659 changed hands, which was to be expected, since the passive acceptance of New Labour was matched by the general disinterest in a Conservative Party still very much battered from its defeat four years' earlier.

Of course, subsequent elections demonstrated a recovery in turnout figures. For the European Elections in 2004, turnout improved significantly, albeit still very much down on general election participation. Although postal voting was by now available on demand

and several regions were holding postal-only ballots, it is unfair to suggest that these reasons are the cause of increased turnout.

2004 is regarded as the breakthrough year for UKIP, which, having won their first three seats in 1999, were to increase their representation fourfold. Fears over EU expansion into former Communist Eastern Europe, coupled with celebrity endorsements for UKIP ensured that this European Election received far more media attention than its predecessors. Both Labour and the Conservatives were also damaged by the Iraq War, allowing the Liberal Democrats to make gains at the expense of Labour.

The elections for Police and Crime Commissioners in 2012 were another low point for voter turnout. Voters were asked to vote for 41 newly-created positions across England and Wales. The elections are notable for a derisory overall turnout of just 15.1%. The lowest turnout was in Staffordshire, where only 11.97% of voters turned up to elect Matthew Ellis as their Police and Crime Commissioner.

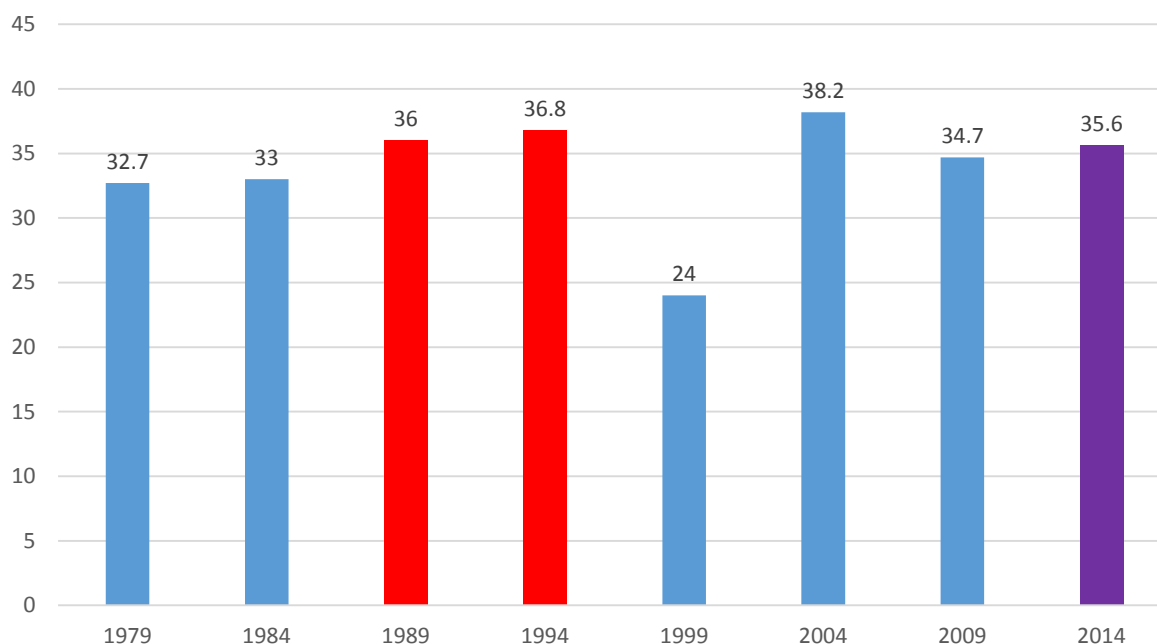
Those elections experienced the worst turnout of any round of elections in British peacetime. Reasons behind this include staging the election in November as opposed to May, and confusion amongst voters as to what the precise role of Police and Crime Commissioners is. Criticism was also levelled against the £5,000 deposit required from candidates and the complexity of rules on candidate eligibility. The Electoral Reform Society issued a damning report into the election, highlighting the reasons behind the failure to inspire voters to cast their ballot. Their recommendations were as follows:

1. "Never hold another election in the winter months which discourages people from turning out."
2. "Never leave voters in the dark about who or what they are voting for."
3. "Ensure a level playing field for candidates through well-designed election rules."¹⁴

At the 2015 General Election, turnout in Scotland was by far higher than the rest of the UK with a 7.2% rise to 71%. This compares to only 65.7% in Wales and 66% in England. There is little doubt that in Scotland, the referendum on independence, followed by the rise of the Scottish National Party as a viable alternative to Labour, had given voters the impetus to cast their vote.

¹⁴ How not to run an election, The Police and Crime Commissioner Elections, Jess Garland and Chris Terry, 15 November 2012
<http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/sites/default/files/How%20not%20to%20run%20an%20election.pdf> (accessed 15.03/2016)

Figure 2: Turnout in European Elections since 1979 (%)



Low Turnout, Electoral reform and safe seats

The 2001 General Election, as already discussed, produced a result, whereby only 29 seats changed hands. Admittedly, that was unusually low, but election after election highlights the problems associated with so called 'safe seats'. A safe seat, typically under a first past the post system, is one where a party can expect to win without much effort, or without facing a significant challenge. Go to Greater Manchester, Merseyside or Tyneside and the majority of seats will fall to Labour, even under the most difficult of electoral circumstances.

The same goes for rural constituencies in South East England for the Conservatives. According to the Electoral Reform Society, these safe seats have become "the 21st Century's rotten boroughs" with many not changing hands since the 1960s, or even earlier. These seats have long become all but abandoned by political parties, as there is little to play for - the consequence being that elections are decided by only a small number of seats, or marginal constituencies. The Electoral Reform Society (ERS) determined in the run up to the 2015 General Election that over half of seats were safe. The regional breakdown is even more staggering, with nearly 80% of seats in the North East region considered to be safe. In 2010, the ERS were able to accurately call 380 so-called safe seats correctly. That same report suggested that seats in England (61.7%) and Wales (50%) were deemed to be safe, whereas in Scotland, the figure is considerably less (10%), in part due to the Scottish Independence Referendum resulting in a surge in popularity for the Scottish National Party. In the ERS report that followed the 2015 General Election, research concluded that 50% of voters, representing 15 million votes, were wasted, whilst 2.8 million voters were likely to have resorted to tactical voting. 74.4% of votes (22 million voters) were wasted as they had 'numerically no influence on the

outcome'. 191 MPs were elected on less than 30% of the vote – the lowest being 24.5% in Belfast South, - and 331 MPs were elected without an overall majority in their constituency. This led the ERS to call 2015 the “most disproportionate in history”.¹⁵

Voters in these safe seats often find that there is little point in turning up to vote, as their vote will not matter. The 20 seats with the lowest voter turnout in 2015 were all Labour constituencies.

The safe seat of Stoke-on-Trent Central highlights this concern where Labour's Tristram Hunt was safely returned on a turnout of 49.9%. Yet only 19% of all eligible voters voted for Labour in this seat. This is a problem that is affecting the Labour Party in particular, where they have been able to hold onto safe seats, despite the party shedding voters. In constituencies, such as Stoke-on-Trent Central and Ed Miliband's Doncaster North, Labour has lost 14,000 votes since 1997.¹⁶

Arguably, the only sure-fire way to remove safe seats and make all votes count equally, would be to introduce some form of proportional representation into Westminster and English local elections. It can never be right that on one hand you have a party secure nearly four million votes and win just a single seat, whereas another party with 1.4 million votes gets 56 seats. UKIP and the Green Party for example, two parties which speak to very different audiences, secured a combined vote of 16.4%, yet between them, walked away with only 0.31% of seats in the House of Commons. The very fact that such a result is possible only fuels electoral disillusionment. No amount of postal voting would make such a disproportional election result fair.¹⁷

Criticism of postal voting

The introduction of postal voting did indeed increase voter participation, albeit for a very limited period. The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust report on the Purity of Elections in the UK found that the so called ‘turnout premium’ is only temporary and that voter turnout declines in the elections that follow. This temporary ‘turnout premium’ however has come at a cost of electoral integrity. The same report by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust found that “greater use of postal voting has made UK elections far more vulnerable to fraud and resulted in several instances of large-scale fraud”, with 42 electoral fraud convictions between 2000-2007. As already discussed, a number of these cases involved attempts at large-scale voter fraud, involving the manipulation of postal ballot papers and postal vote application papers. Whilst the UK suffers from low public confidence in the electoral process, compared to other Western European nations, there is evidence to suggest that this confidence has been eroded further by postal voting. British Asian voters, a sub-section of voter disproportionately at risk from postal vote fraud, registered very low confidence in the electoral process, with only 46% of voters regarding the postal

¹⁵ The 2015 General Election, A voting system in crisis, Jess Garland and Chris Terry, The Electoral Reform Society, Page 22.

¹⁶ 20 seats with the lowest turnout show Labour voters drifting to UKIP – or not voting at all, New Statesman, 13 May 2015 <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/05/20-seats-lowest-turnout-show-labour-voters-drifting-ukip-or-not-voting-all> (accessed 15.03/2016)

¹⁷ Green party and UKIP join forces to demand electoral overhaul, The Guardian, 18 May 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/18/green-party-ukip-electoral-reform-first-past-post-elections> (accessed 15.03/2016)

vote system as safe. This may be in part due to, as the report mentions, the very real issue of “traditional forms of Pakistani ‘clan politics’ which have been a common factor in a significant minority of recent prosecutions for electoral fraud.”¹⁸

What has postal voting on demand achieved?

Arguably, the introduction of postal voting has resulted in a ‘stitch-up’ in many constituencies that are considered safe seats. In seats traditionally dominated by one party, the local Labour Party or Conservative Party machine have been very efficient over the years promoting postal vote application amongst historical supporters. These parties, owing to their history, have built up a database of legacy supporters going back generations and it is to some extent, only fair that they can use their own data to shore up that support. Traditionally, this would be in the form of offering voters transport to polling stations, knowing where to erect garden boards and posters, etc. However, with the introduction of postal voting, many of these voters are almost taken out of the main election campaign altogether. When parties know that so many seats are already decided long before an election is even called, in part thanks to postal voting, making it more difficult to dislodge incumbent parties and candidates, the fight for marginal constituencies intensifies. The Electoral Reform Society in a report on campaign spending during the 2010 General Election found that the value of a vote went up or down depending on whether it was in a marginal constituency. Luton South for example was considered a three-way marginal and therefore £3.07 was spent for every vote cast. Meanwhile the ultra-safe seat of Bootle had only 14 pence spent for every vote cast. The Conservatives spent nothing at all in Bootle.¹⁹

With such little voter engagement in seats like Bootle, what incentive is there for anyone to vote? Non-Labour voters will know they can never make an impact against a Labour MP, whilst Labour voters may also be inclined to stay away, as they know the election is already settled.

Postal voting simply reinforces this: Non-postal voters acknowledge that a bulk of votes have already been cast by post – a majority in certain seats. Following the 2015 General Election, we now have a nation divided. Conservative seats in the south and Labour seats in the north are becoming safer, whilst Scotland has become a one-party state. Cities such as Manchester over-represent one party (Labour controlled every seat on Manchester city council in 2014), meaning that many voters find themselves with no representation whatsoever.

Postal voting has been a distraction and in some parts of the UK, a con. The argument for introducing postal voting on demand, in order to boost voter turnout has turned out to be a fallacy. What drives voters to the polls is not the ability to vote by post. Voters cast their vote if they believe their vote can genuinely make a difference and under the current

¹⁸ Purity of elections in the UK, Causes for concern, The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd. <http://www.jrrt.org.uk/sites/jrrt.org.uk/files/documents/Purity%20of%20Elections%20in%20the%20UK%20-%20Executive%20Summary.pdf> (accessed 15.03/2016)

¹⁹ Penny for your vote, Counting the cost of an unfair electoral system, Chris Terry, Electoral Reform Society http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/sites/default/files/ERS_Penny%20for%20your%20vote_Final.pdf (accessed 15.03/2016)

electoral system, many votes simply do not matter. If establishment parties are so concerned about voter participation, they should look at introducing a form of proportional representation to make votes fair. This would encourage parties to stop taking safe seats for granted, as they know every vote would then count.

What would UKIP do?

With the evidence provided, it is clear that postal voting, coupled with a broken, out-of-date electoral system has done nothing to increase voter participation and in many cases, is in fact driving voters away. Voter satisfaction with traditional, establishment parties is at rock bottom, but sadly there is an incumbency lock that prevents challenger parties from making the impact that they should.

UKIP would amend the Representation of the People Act 2000 and do away with the ludicrous system that allows postal voting 'on demand'. This would go a long way in restoring our electoral legitimacy and reinforce the belief that UK elections are being held in a fair and proper manner. The legacy of postal voting will have had a profound effect on UK electoral registers. It is therefore necessary to fully audit the electoral register to ensure that only those eligible to vote are able to do so. UKIP would oppose and object to attempts to introduce any other form of absent voting such as by online or by text, as the legitimacy of such votes can be compromised. UKIP would ensure that unless there is a genuine need for a postal ballot, voters will only be able to cast their vote in polling stations.

Finally, UKIP would move away from a system of all-first-past-the-post elections at both local and national level. Voter participation is hampered when voters believe that there is no reasonable chance of change. The idea of so-called safe seats, where parties can hold a seat effectively unchallenged for generations is bad for democracy and breeds bad governance. UKIP believes there has to be at least an element of proportional representation introduced into local government and Westminster elections. This would result in fewer votes being wasted on losing candidates and eliminate the dangerous and wholly unacceptable situation where a single party can control every seat on a local authority.